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BROCK'S BANTER: Coping with the World Around You

By Brock Weir

In this line of work, you sometimes have to cover events and stories that are naturally outside your comfort zone.

To pick just one example from my time coming up through Carleton University's journalism program, one hardened-before-her-time CBC reporter told us that the most dreaded job when she was first starting out in her career was covering a Royal Visit sometime in the 1990s, when she wanted to be out in the field, covering crime scenes and hot political turmoil.

Some people might thrive on the police beat, for instance, tackling the seedy underbelly of our society head-on, issues like human trafficking, knowing that the work they do by shedding a light on these very important issues can go a long way towards eradication.

But there are others still who shudder at the very thought of getting this kind of assignment.

There are few things more difficult for a reporter than being assigned a story on a murder, a missing person, or other tragedies that require you to delicately approach a grieving family for their personal insight on what they're feeling.

Usually, if approached in the right way, they are understanding, conscious of the fact we're simply doing our job and giving them an opportunity to speak; an opportunity which often gives them a chance to pay heartfelt tribute to a loved one.

It's a tough situation to navigate and it is rarely the kind of work that can actually be left in the office. You invariably bring it home with you; it can pop back into your head without any sort of warming. Some might see it as PTSD, others might avoid it, but no situation is less impactful.

What I'm describing is nothing new. You've heard generations of editors, reporters, and other media personnel speak about it. You've probably picked up snippets from academic studies looking at the same. Maybe you too have experienced it, but what I hadn't considered until very recently was the impact these stories have on consumers ? readers, viewers, and listeners.

But, I should have considered this much earlier because we're all victims of this.

I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling compelled to tune out for a little bit during the heat of the 2016 United States Presidential

Election when vitriol was at its zenith.

It was a time hallmarked on childish name-calling, outlandish conspiracy theories being somehow legitimized simply by who was spouting them, racial slurs and dog-whistles being thrown out with as much care as one would throw away a Kleenex, and people ignoring the world metaphorically burning down around them with a singular focus on an email server ? all amplified by the 24-hour news cycle.

For the sake of my own mental health, I instituted an all-too-brief moratorium on American television news, and it was glorious ? but I hadn't considered this was a ?thing? until a story published late last month by a reporter from Yahoo! Canada News.

In her story, ?How to cope with this week's tragic news stories,? Megan DeLaire wrote about the multiple emotional gut punches we received as a nation in mid-February, including the tragic fire in Nova Scotia which killed eight refugee children planning new roots in their new home, and the death in Brampton of Riya Rajkumar, who was the subject of an Amber Alert the previous evening.

?Often, when a tragedy like a violent crime or deadly fire occurs, the people closest to the epicentre of that tragedy have access to supports like grief and trauma counselling,? wrote DeLaire. ?But distressing events can also affect the people who follow them in the news and become personally invested.?

She cites work carried out by grief and trauma expert Karen Letofsky, who has looked into the impact of repetition and shocking imagery in our news cycles.

?That can have an impact with respect to inducing an emotional reaction,? said Letofsky in the article. ?It is going to be on a continuum from somebody that's severely affected to somebody that's momentarily distressed. If you have been traumatized before, if you are in an emotionally vulnerable place in your own life, I think these triggers and what it takes to have an emotional impact on you might be less intense than if you are in a place in your life where you're not as vulnerable. If you're constantly hearing these stories and they're reported in a matter-of-fact way?it can numb you and deaden you so that you don't have an appropriate emotional reaction, so that's the flipside.?

She goes on to recommend moderating news consumption to revisiting a particular story just once or twice before taking a break, but it is also important to have keen self-awareness and a sense of self-care.

Moderation is a great tool, as are self-awareness and self-care, but in addition to having supports like counselling readily available, I, as a reader was left to wonder about the value of knowing where to turn for opportunities to channel the feelings left by what you've read ?

or, in the case of some of us, what you've written ? and channel that into positive change.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Judy and Dennis Shepard, the parents of Matthew Shepard, who was murdered in an anti-Gay hate crime in Wyoming in 1998 touched upon this issue when speaking to a group of students, parents and community members. When asked how they had the ability to get past the pain and have the strength to do something positive with their grief, they admitted it was an overwhelming process, but something they had to do.

?We felt we owed that to Matt and his community,? said Judy. ?It became the reason I got out of bed in the morning. It gave me purpose. The idea of closure just doesn't exist. You just learn to build your life around the tragedy and to accept that sometimes you just cry for no reason?and you just figure out how to make it work. We just felt it was really important. We felt that we had maybe two years at most to tell Matt's story and people would just move on to the next tragedy, but, for some reason, Matt's story has resonated for much longer. It was a conscious choice and it gave us purpose. It was our survival.?

I would like to know how you cope with difficult news in the papers, on television, and in online platforms. Please send your thoughts to brock@auroran.com.